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ABSTRACT

A study examined undergraduate student (n=310) attitudes and expectations about future parenting experiences, particularly their attitudes regarding the gender preference for their first child. Findings revealed that female college students were more likely to predict having a son as their first child. A strong preference for boys (92%) was observed among the male college students (chi square X2=61.2 p<001). Most of the female students (57%), however, predicted having daughters first. Prior research has suggested that parents, in general, and fathers, specifically, demonstrate differing levels of involvement and commitment when their child is of a favored gender or not. As family life educators work with expectant parents, implications from this study may alert them to this potentially important variable in the processes of early parenthood. Contains six references. (Author/BT)

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"Oh Boy! Oh Boy!: College Students' Prediction for Their First Child "

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Abstract

This study examined undergraduate students' attitudes and expectations about future parenting experiences, especially their attitudes regarding the gender preference for their first child. Findings revealed that female college students were more likely to predict having a son as their first child. A strong preference for boys (92%) was observed among the male college students (chi square χ^2 = 61.2 $p<.001$). However, most of the female college students (57%) predicted having daughters first. Prior research has suggested that parents in general and fathers in specific demonstrate differing levels of involvement and commitment when their child is of a favored gender or not. As family life educators work with expectant parents, implications from this study may alert them to this potentially important variable in the processes of early parenthood.

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Oh Boy Oh Boy: College Students' Prediction for their First Child

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Parents' gender preferences for children have been well documented in history, and are embedded in cultural, religious, community, and societal norms. Children of a particular gender are often more desired because of the perceived benefits or costs of having a certain gender. Having male offspring once implied the continuity for the family heritage, passing down of the family wealth/business (American women could not inherit property until late 1800s and could not vote until 1912), providing financial, farming, practical assistance and security for parents' old age. Some research has indicated the preference for sons is still prominent especially in many countries like India (Malhi, 1995) and China. A strong commitment to and expectation for a certain sex in children has led to tragedies such as discrimination or even infanticide. Sex ratios at birth vary across countries due to health, fertility rates, prenatal sex screening, sex-selective abortion and some female births not being registered. Even if societies provided unbiased health conditions and equal nutrition to both males and females, male mortality rates are higher at any age from conception on (Smith and Smith, 1994).

Traditional values for many Asian countries have placed a premium on producing male heirs, but recently there have been suggestions that this trend changing. Japan was once a country with a strong preference for sons. Failure to produce a male heir used to be grounds for divorce. Recent surveys showed that up to 75% of young Japanese parents now prefer baby girls (Efron, 1995). This overwhelming enthusiasm for baby

girls was easily observed from popular how-to-books and magazines, expensive services for sex selection and clinics dispensing pink suppository jelly to help produce girls or green for boys to assist couples in conceiving the child of their dreams. Reasons supporting this preference for girls include factors such as the desire for a stronger bond and stereotypes about girls (e.g., cuter, softer, easier to raise). Although the same level of passion for baby girls was not observed in the United States, some stated that many American women also fantasizes about giving birth to a baby girl (Klass, P., 2001).

The "match" of the child's gender to parent's preference could impact parent child relations and interaction. Zimberoff and Hartman (1998) reported some parents were actually traumatized when they learned that they did not get the child they had wished for. A group of two hundred and twelve Swedish expectant mothers (ages 21-25) participated in a study by Stattin and Klackenberg-Larsson (1991) and the participants were interviewed several times before and after delivery. Prior to delivery, the majority of the mothers (52.3%) wanted their first child to be a girl, 32.8% expressed a preference for a boy, and the rest (14.9%) had no explicit preference. However, the mothers indicated that in their opinion, more of the fathers wanted a son. Congruence or incongruence (when the child's gender matched with parent's expectation or not) was found to be an important predictor of parent-child Interactions. For example, mothers of the incongruent girls reported less time playing with their child than did mothers of congruent girls. Surprisingly, parent's prenatal prediction did impact the parent-child interaction, even for first-born children. Parents' gender preferences of children are found to be most prominent for the third and fourth child (Hank and Kohler, 2000), weaker for the first child.

Although parents' gender preferences are researched in conjunction with population studies for many Asian countries, little empirical research exists which investigated the status of parental gender preferences in the United States and the implications of this preference. With the years of rapid political changes and the feminist movement, one might conclude that gender preferences for children should have diminished in the United States. However, gender preferences for children still exist in the United States, it just has become more subtle. In many American families, boys are still more highly valued than girls, and that the gender preference is socially sanctioned (Zimberoff and Hartman, 1998). Studies have documented that fathers with sons were more involved and committed to their children than fathers without sons. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain further understanding of gender preferences for children and timing/preparation of parenthood for college students.

Methods

Three hundred and ten college students (87 men and 223 women) from a regional mid-western university were included in this study. The participants were students from different sections of a general education course. The participants are predominantly white (93%), fifty percent of volunteers were freshman, 25% were sophomores, 12% were juniors and 15% were seniors. This course is taken by approximately 60% of the students at the university and is generally representative of the student body by curriculum. As part of the in-class writing activity, the subjects were asked to write a letter to their future first child stating when and under what circumstances they plan to have their first child. Letters from students who already have children at the time of the

survey, or do not plan to have children were not analyzed for this study. All participants were encouraged to guess the sex of their first child and name their child.

Results

I. Overall

Overall, participants reported a great enthusiasm for entering parenthood. A high level of romanticism and fanaticism were observed.

Some examples:

... I have been always dreaming of having a child on my arm and to sing her a lullaby every night

She smiles and lights up the entire room

... your life will be filled with joy

... your presence has made all my dreams come true.

II. Prediction of the First Child's Sex

1. Among Male Students

Among the male participants, 92% predicted sons and 8% predicted daughters (chi square χ^2=61.2 $p<.001$). Many men plan to name their sons (juniors). Here are examples of the responses from male students: (names have been changed to ensure confidentiality).

For example:

Dear James, I am 19 right now so hopefully you won't come around for another few years. I named you after your grant-grandfather.

Dear Jay Jr., My whole life I dreamed that one day I would have you and that I could have a loving family that would give you success in whatever you wanted to do in life.

Dear Jessica, I am going to be a very loving parent to you.

Dear Janet, ... your mother wanted a girl first

2. Among Female Students

Among the female participants, 43% predicted sons and 57% predicted daughters. (Chi square =4.32 $p<.05$).

For example:

Dear Jonathan, For as long as I can remember, I always wanted my first child to be a loving son.

Dear Jason Daniel, First of all I would like to tell you how you got your name. You are named after your father and grandfather.

Dear Jasmine: As I sit here dreaming of my future, I see this a beautiful baby girl.

Dear Jenny: Your existence meant so much to me! I've always wanting a daughter and your presence made my life complete.

III. Timing and Circumstances

Ninety-nine percent of all students planned on having their children two to three years after they got married. Most students reported planning to have their children in their late 20s. Overall, participants reported a high level of dedication, passion and love. Many revealed planning to be the "best" parents. Among all participants, only one female student planned on adopting her first child.

Examples

.... You will be greeted by a host of family members and grandparents.

I will be married already hopefully for about three years. Your father and I will both work so we can provide you with a stable environment...a caring environment, with all the support....

I want to be a good parent; I want to always be there for you.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study show a clear preference for a male child on the part of male undergraduates. There was no such gender preference expressed by the female

subjects. The preference for a male heir has a long pedigree. The influence of feminism and other social changes have challenged this preference and made it less socially acceptable. However, the preference, at least on the part of males, has not disappeared. Subjects may be unwilling to admit to it directly, but a gender bias still exists. This may have implications for fathers' involvement with their children, with "less desired" daughters more likely to receive less attention from their fathers. If daughters are less desirable it is not unreasonable to anticipate they might receive less attention. Both daughters and sons benefit from involved fathers.

These subjects were also held unrealistic and exaggerated perceptions about their future performance as parents. As Urie Bronfenbrenner has pointed out, this may be the first generation in history where large numbers of individuals are reaching adulthood without ever having had to care for a dependent infant or young child. With little or no experience it is not surprising that their expectations are unrealistic. Our society requires that each child, male or female, is wanted and valued and that parents are reasonably realistic and prepared before assuming the responsibilities of parenthood. Parent educators, policy makers and the larger society all have a role to play in making this happen for all our children. As family life educators work with expectant parents, implications from this study may alert them to this potentially important variable in the process of early parenthood.

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